

Commodity cultures: the traffic in things

Peter Jackson

Focusing on the commodification of various forms of cultural difference, this paper reviews recent work within the 'globalization' and 'creolization' paradigms, outlining an agenda for future research. Rather than condemning commodification as an unwarranted threat to the 'authenticity' of local cultures, the paper argues for a more complex understanding of people's relationship with the world of goods. Using a variety of examples, it is argued that the 'traffic in things' is associated with a wide range of meanings and a diversity of responses. Informed by recent debates in anthropology and material culture studies, it is suggested that geographical metaphors (such as distance and displacement) provide a more productive way of engaging with contemporary commodity cultures than do visual metaphors (such as unveiling or unmasking). Other means of transcending the distinction between cultural and economic geographies are also discussed.

key words commodification consumption material culture cultural politics

Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN
email: p.a.jackson@sheffield.ac.uk

revised manuscript received 28 May 1998

Introduction

The globalization of production systems and the growing international movement of people, goods and services is increasingly acknowledged as having complex, geographically uneven and socially differentiated effects, rather than being seen in terms of an inevitable process of cultural homogenization, flattening out the distinctiveness of 'local cultures' (compare Featherstone 1990; King 1991; Massey and Jess 1995). The emergence of new cultural forms through processes of creolization or hybridization denies any simple equation between globalization and homogenization. According to Appadurai, for example, 'as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized' (1996, 32).¹ Significantly for my subsequent argument, Appadurai talks of this process in terms of a language of 'deterritorialization', 'displacement' and 'repatriation'.

In a similar fashion, recent research on the geographies of consumption (summarized in Jackson and Thrift 1995) has insisted on the

creativity of 'ordinary consumers' in actively shaping the meanings of the goods they consume in various local settings. With consumption duly 'acknowledged' (Miller 1995a), however, the balance is now in danger of tipping the other way, divorcing consumption from other elements of the 'circuit of culture' (Mackay 1997). The problem has been exacerbated by a tendency to equate culture with consumption, and the economic with production, despite several recent studies that demonstrate the merits of taking a more 'economic' approach to consumption and a more 'cultural' approach to the workplace geographies of production (eg du Gay 1996; Peck 1996; McDowell 1997).

Existing work on the geographies of commodification has tended to focus on a limited range of commodities (particularly food and other retail goods) and to restrict analysis to a very literal definition of the commodity form.² Moreover, previous studies (of 'exotic' food and 'ethnic' cultures, for example) have tended to treat commodification as a dirty word, implying that once such cultures have been commodified, they have inevitably been devalued and degraded. Constance Classen's

(1996) study of consumption in the Argentine Northwest presents one such (by no means extreme) example. Using biographical evidence from her own and her family's experience, she examines 'the influx of foreign consumer goods into the region' (39). Her examples include some of the classic indicators of the 'globalization' of consumption, such as Coca-Cola, the commodification of Christmas and the introduction of North American-style shopping malls. Her discussion of the transformation of 'local culture' is couched in a language of disapproval and nostalgic regret, as when 'A local fruit [avocado] disappears from the landscape and reappears ... as a packaged health food for diet-conscious consumers' or when 'Tradition is transformed into fast food' (49). While she admits in her conclusion that 'imported goods, images and terms are often reinvented within the context of their new cultural location to suit local sensibilities' (53), the bulk of her argument is much less nuanced, arguing that 'cultural imperialism' and 'Northern-style materialism' render 'The home-made, the traditional and the local ... debased and undesirable' (52).

While there is much to criticize about contemporary commodity cultures, the complexities and contradictions of commodification are easily missed by those who adopt a rhetoric of moral outrage and blanket disapproval. This paper uses a variety of examples to demonstrate the range of meanings and diversity of responses associated with the 'traffic in things'. It aims to outline a more subtle response to the cultural complexities of commodification, challenging the shrill language and simplistic assumptions that underlie such accounts, and unsettling some of their apparent certainties. Having defined its terms and critiqued some of the conventional narratives, the paper attempts to expand our understanding of commodity cultures to encompass the commodification of various kinds of cultural difference, as well as the commodification of specific goods and services. It challenges the received wisdom (on the Left, at least) that commodification is, always and everywhere, a 'bad thing'. Instead, the paper argues that most of us, most of the time (in modern Western societies), have a much more complex relationship with the world of goods than can be captured by a simple renunciation of 'consumerism' or by simple acts of resistance to the power of 'the market'. Rather than assuming that such issues can be settled in an arbitrary or *a priori* way, reference

is made in each case to appropriate empirical evidence.

Commodities and commodification

For some authors, 'commodities' are simply objects of economic value (though this only refers the question back to what is meant by value). Others prefer a narrower definition, confining the meaning of commodities to products that are intended for exchange. Some would restrict its meaning still further, to exchange within particular (specifically capitalist) modes of production. Here, the inevitable starting point is Marx, who placed his critique of the commodity form at the beginning of the first volume of *Capital*. Arguing that 'a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing' (1867, 163), Marx went on to explore the ramifications of 'commodity fetishism' within capitalist forms of exchange.³ Marx showed how commodification involved the conversion of use values into exchange values (often via monetary exchange) as, for example, when goods are produced for sale rather than for purely personal use.⁴ Paraphrasing Marx, Don Slater outlines how the commodification of labour power contributes further to the process of alienation:

Commodified labour produces commodities, things that are produced for sale and therefore for consumption by someone other than the person whose labour produced it. Instead of being organically and transparently linked within praxis, the relation between production and consumption is indirect and mediated through markets, money, prices, competition and profit – the whole apparatus of commodity exchange. (1997, 107)

'Commodification' refers, literally, to the extension of the commodity form to goods and services that were not previously commodified. Such a process was particularly characteristic of Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, when, as Thomas Richards has argued, the commodity became and has since remained 'the one subject of mass culture, the centrepiece of everyday life, the focal point of all representation, the dead center of the modern world' (1991, 1). More recently, the Thatcherite celebration of 'enterprise culture', the 'free market' and 'consumer choice' led to an extension of the ideology of the market into areas that were previously regarded as relatively uncommodified, including education, healthcare,

broadcasting and the arts. The process generated a heated debate about morality as well as economics, a point that is developed below (see also [Keat forthcoming](#)). While many critics have regarded commodification as inherently 'bad', reducing human relations to an economic logic where everything has its price, others are more ambivalent about its consequences. Such ambivalence about the effects of commodification can even be detected in Marx's writings. As [Andrew Sayer \(1997, 23\)](#) argues, quoting from the *Communist manifesto*, the levelling effects of the market and the power of money to transgress cultural boundaries (as 'the heavy artillery of cheap commodities breaks down all Chinese walls') may be counterbalanced by the tendency of the market to dispel narrow-mindedness and parochialism ('the idiocy of rural life'), leading to a process of cultural enrichment.

Recently, [John Frow \(1997\)](#) has questioned whether the commodity form is 'necessarily and always less humanly beneficial than non-commodified use values' and whether its historical extension is 'necessarily and under all circumstances a change for the worse' (136). According to Frow,

the commodity form has the potential to be enabling and productive as well as to be limiting and destructive. Historically it has almost always been both of these things at the same time, and the balance of gain and loss has rarely been easy to draw. ([1997, 138](#))

Following Frow, this paper seeks to trace the particular benefits and disbenefits associated with specific kinds of commodification, rather than assuming that they can be mapped in some abstract and *a priori* fashion.⁵

Unsettling conventional accounts

Previous studies of the globalization of consumption were often framed within a simple narrative, whereby a monolithic global capitalism was held responsible for overwhelming local experience, contributing to 'the destruction of regional cultures' ([Peet 1986](#)). Though often regarded as the dominant paradigm and referred to variously as a process of 'Coca-colonization' ([Hannerz 1992](#)) or 'McDonaldization' ([Ritzer 1993](#)), such an approach is actually increasingly rare. The diffusion of 'global' products and their local 'reception' is now generally acknowledged to be much more complex. While products such as Coca-Cola or

McDonald's may strive for an increasingly global reach, their local consumption is mediated by marketing strategies that are carefully tailored for specific national markets. So, for example, the basic format of Coca-Cola's 'General Assembly' advertisement was originally recorded in Liverpool in 1987, where a suitably multicultural cast could be easily assembled. A new version was filmed locally for broadcast in the Philippines, and the advert was reshot with an entirely Spanish cast assembled at Machu Picchu for broadcast in Peru. Similarly, slogans such as 'Can't Beat the Feeling' and 'Coke is It' were found to translate badly when exported to various overseas markets and were replaced with 'The Feeling of Life' in Chile, 'Unique Sensation' in Italy and 'I Feel Coke' in Japan ([Pendergrast 1994, 368](#)).

Moreover, as Miller and others have pointed out, the 'globalization' of production frequently involves complex local arrangements of franchising and subcontracting. In Trinidad, for example, [Miller \(1997\)](#) suggests that companies include 'local globals' – overseas-based transnationals represented in Trinidad by a local office – and 'global locals' – where local offices of global transnationals are increasingly dwarfed by home-grown Trinidadian companies, originating locally but subsequently emerging as transnationals in their own right ([1997, 60](#)). Miller insists that 'local' factors (such as the role of the state and questions of ethnic identity) have an increasingly important bearing even on the Trinidadian branches of truly transnational companies.

If the 'global homogenization' thesis is flawed with respect to the complexities of localized production, it can also be challenged in relation to the geography of consumption. In what [Howes \(1996\)](#) refers to as the 'creolization paradigm', numerous studies have emphasized how the meaning of goods has been transformed in accordance with the values of the 'receiving' culture.⁶ An outstanding example is provided by [Marie Gillespie's \(1995\)](#) ethnographic study of Southall, which shows that, for young Punjabi Londoners, products such as Coca-Cola and McDonald's hamburgers have very specific meanings that may be quite different from those that are 'intended' by their producers.⁷ Rather than standing as some undifferentiated model of 'Americanization', Gillespie shows that the consumption of these commodities is mediated by local definitions of what it means to be a Punjabi teenager in Britain, subject to various cultural

restrictions on eating meat and other forms of 'Westernization', while simultaneously defining themselves as distinct from parental notions of culturally appropriate behaviour. Miller's work in Trinidad also shows how the local popularity of American soap operas such as *The young and the restless* cannot be reduced to any simple understanding of the 'Americanization' of Caribbean culture. Instead, he shows how their meaning is inflected by specifically Trinidadian idioms, providing a convenient resource with which to reflect on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and other 'local' concerns (Miller 1992).⁸

These studies place a welcome emphasis on the 'localization' of global products. But the complexities of commodification can be taken further, as a parallel process of globalization has begun to affect a range of products that were previously distinguished by their specific geographical origins. Carol Hendrickson's (1996) study of the marketing of a range of Guatemalan artefacts in the US (through various mail-order catalogues) provides a good example. Described as 'Mayan' (or sometimes as 'Indian' or simply 'traditional'), the products are typically identified as having been 'hand-made' (or 'crafted'), as originating from 'high above the Guatemalan rainforests' and as 'unique' or 'one of a kind'. Without discussing how these catalogues are actually read or how such products are used by actual consumers, Hendrickson reaches a pessimistic conclusion about 'the creative capacities of advertisements' and their 'power over consumers' (1996, 111).

While the 'creolization' paradigm has involved a renewed emphasis on consumer creativity, most accounts, especially on the Left, retain an emphasis on the powerlessness and passivity of the consumer. David Harvey provides a much-quoted example: asking readers to reflect on the world of social labour that is involved in the preparation of a typical meal, he argues that:

we can in practice consume our meal without the slightest knowledge of the intricate geography of production and the myriad social relationships embedded in the system that puts it upon our table. (1990, 422)

The job of social scientists, Harvey concludes, is to 'lift the veil on this geographical and social ignorance' (423). While Harvey's analysis may lead to desirable consequences in terms of the development of more ethical forms of consumption, a disquieting aspect of the argument is the

implication that academics have a uniquely critical insight into the social relations and conditions of production that escape the notice of 'ordinary consumers'. An alternative way forward might be to explore a range of different metaphors besides Harvey's insistence on 'unveiling' ('exposing' or 'unmasking') what was previously hidden. For example, in this next instance, Sarah Whatmore follows Harvey's analysis, but substitutes a geographical metaphor (of 'distancing') for his visual one (of 'unveiling'):

Food is a basic condition of human life, but for most people in the advanced industrial countries of Western Europe, North America and Australasia today, it has become a taken-for-granted facet of daily consumption. Stacking a trolley in the supermarket is an everyday chore; getting a take-away, a commonplace convenience; eating out, an integral part of many business and leisure routines. (1995, 36)

Yet, she continues:

These consumer experiences of food are quite profoundly distanced from the social and economic organization of agriculture and the contemporary processes of food production. Milk may still come from cows and apples grow on trees (don't they?) but how does farming, the anchor of common-sense understandings of food production, fit into the creation of oven-ready meals; genetically engineered plants and animals; or synthetic foodstuffs? The prevalent representation of such experiences as the mark of 'consumer choice' belies a diminished understanding of, and control over, what it is we are eating and the social conditions under which it is produced. (36)

It is the idea of 'distance' that opens out the analysis to other interpretations besides those that cast consumers in an entirely passive role vis-à-vis the (increasingly centralized and powerful) forces and relations of production. The idea of distance also recalls Simmel's (1907) work, where he argued that the value of commodities cannot be reduced to an intrinsic property of objects, but exists in the space or distance between our desires and our enjoyment of those objects. There is, then, for Simmel as for Marx, an inherent spatiality to the commodity form, though Simmel reverses Marx's logic to argue that it is demand that endows objects with value, and not, as Marx argued, the labour power involved in their production.

Other metaphors of distance and space have been taken up enthusiastically by several contemporary cultural critics. In his work on the diaspora cultures of the 'Black Atlantic', for example, Gilroy

(1993) insists that geographical origins are of limited relevance to cultural creativity. He goes on to substitute the geographical metaphor of *routes* for the biological one of *roots*, tracing the active production of meaning in various processes of 'creolization'. The 'routes' metaphor has also been employed by Doreen Massey in her search for a more progressive sense of place than that implied in traditional arguments about stable, inward-looking communities with impenetrable boundaries and a nostalgic concern for an idealized past. While traditional studies of a sense of place were tainted by their yearning for a lost authenticity, an exaggerated emphasis on memory, stasis and nostalgia, in Massey's reconceptualization places are constituted through a distinctive articulation of interconnections at a variety of scales from the global to the local. Significantly, too, her example of Kilburn High Road makes reference to several commodities of diverse origin:

It is a pretty ordinary place, north-west of the centre of London. Under the railway bridge the newspaper stand sells papers from every county of what my neighbours, many of whom come from there, still often call the Irish Free State ... Thread your way through the often almost stationary traffic diagonally across the road from the newsstand and there's a shop which as long as I can remember has displayed saris in the window. Four life-sized models of Indian women, and reams of cloth ... (1994, 152–3)

In their recent work on the 'geographical knowledges' that are traded along with specific commodities (such as 'exotic' fruits and 'ethnic' food), Ian Cook and Philip Crang also use a highly spatialized language. Arguing that consumption is a geographically constituted process, Crang (1996) employs the metaphor of 'displacement' to explore the juxtapositions and connections that exist between displaced commodities and their associated knowledges, a line of argument that is pursued in his work with Ian Cook on culinary cultures (Cook and Crang 1996).⁹ Using another geographical metaphor, Crang (1996) argues that consumers make all sorts of 'inhabitations' of commodity systems that result not in a simple sense of alienation but in a series of mutual 'entanglements' between consumers and consumption systems (cf Thomas 1991). Such arguments offer an attractive alternative to simple metaphors of 'unmasking' or 'unveiling', which seek to reveal the hidden social relations of production that are 'disguised' in the commodity form.

Morality and the market

Those who criticize commodification on moral grounds frequently do so by contrasting the depersonalized and anonymous commodity, at one pole, with the inalienable singularity of human beings, at the other pole. The fact that people have been treated as commodities at various points in human history – bought and sold as slaves, for example, either literally or in the form of 'wage slavery' – reinforces the moral conviction of this position. But, as Igor Kopytoff (1986, 75–6) and others have argued, even slavery had a range of effects for those who were subject to its dehumanizing economic logic. So too, in other contexts, we might wish to inquire why such moral opprobrium attaches to certain kinds of commodification (of sexual services or human genes, for example) rather than to other kinds (such as the sale of food or animals).

The condemnation of all forms of commodification as immoral frequently rests on a contrast between commodities and culture. Proponents of this view argue that, whereas commodification homogenizes value, culture values difference. Baudrillard's condemnation of 'consumer society' relies on a distinction whereby the daily dealings of human beings are described as being 'not so much with their fellow men [sic], but rather ... with the reception and manipulation of goods and messages' (1998, 25). For Baudrillard, consumers experience material objects through advertising in a thoroughly uncritical way, as a 'miracle' of misrecognition. Such distinctions are, however, easily overplayed. For, as Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates, cultural or aesthetic judgements are rarely disinterested, frequently serving to sustain social inequalities, while various forms of cultural difference are readily commodifiable. Thus, in Victorian Britain, the extension of overseas trade was justified by a culture (described by McClintock (1995) as a process of 'commodity racism') that associated whiteness with cleanliness and purity at home, in contrast to the associations of blackness with dirt and pollution abroad. The resulting entanglements between ideologies of domesticity and imperialism underline the artificiality involved in making any clear distinction between 'culture' and the commodity form.

By treating commodities as complex cultural forms, the morality of commodification remains an open question, subject to empirical investigation

rather than a question that can be settled *a priori*.¹⁰ Taking a number of examples, the remainder of this paper seeks to trace the geography of specific processes of commodification. Despite the inherent spatiality of commodity exchange (as outlined above), the geographical constitution of exchange systems has frequently been neglected, or treated in a purely metaphorical way. Apart from the exceptions already noted, some insightful studies of the 'commodity chains' that are associated with the internationalization of food production (Friedland *et al* 1981; Goodman and Redclift 1991), Glennie and Thrift's (1992) work on the emergence of modern consumption and the extended reach of commodities facilitated by new media technologies, and the influential 'systems of provision' approach associated with the work of Fine and Leopold (1993), there is relatively little work on the geography of commodification.¹¹ This is particularly true of the commodification of various forms of cultural difference, to which we now turn.

Commodifying cultural difference

While there may be nothing intrinsically wrong with the commodification of cultural difference, it is clear that the ability to commodify other cultures is not evenly distributed in society or space. For those with the necessary economic and cultural capital, it is increasingly easy to enjoy 'a little taste of something more exotic' (May 1996a), while those with fewer resources are more likely to be on the receiving end of such processes. Jon May's research in Stoke Newington, a gentrifying district of inner North London, shows that the ability to commodify cultural difference has become a central feature of the 'lifestyle' choices of members of the area's 'new cultural class' (artists, designers and other media professionals). Such residents exercise a taste for exotic food as a way of marking out social and cultural distinctions from the area's other (working-class and ethnic minority) residents. As one of May's informants enthuses,

I just love it. I love it because it's different – a little taste of something more exotic ... Most days I might have an Indian meal, or a Thai meal or a Chinese meal, or a vegetarian take-away, or pasta. I never just have a cheese omelette, never, it's boring ... (May 1996a, 61)

The African-American cultural critic bell hooks refers disparagingly to this process as 'eating the Other' (hooks 1992), whereby commodity culture

provides an opportunity to consume the products of various different ethnicities in a highly contrived and controlled way, strictly on the consumer's own terms. Through 'eating the Other', hooks suggests, consumers assert their power and privilege over those whose cultures are consumed. May goes on to show that this desire for difference is powerfully aestheticized, as demonstrated in this extract from an interview with 'Alex' (a graphic designer in his mid-30s who moved to Stoke Newington about ten years ago):

Coming through Church Street you've got that glorious shot of church spires and the trees and the park, and all that ... it's a real sort of postcardy thing. The only thing that's missing is the cricket pitch ... It's very sort of Englishy ... And, er, I mean I'm English and I do like England's Englishness I suppose ... So, whilst I accept, you know, multi-cultural society and stuff like that, I probably wouldn't if Stoke Newington became sort of radically Muslim in its feel – then I probably wouldn't feel that comfortable living here anymore, you know? (May 1996b, 203)

As Alex's references to 'Englishness' and 'radically Muslim' suggest, such a visual aesthetic quickly spills over into racialized forms of social exclusion. For other residents, such as 'Dorian' (another graphic designer in her 30s), part of the area's appeal is its ethnic diversity, which makes it feel 'kind of sharp':

It has a feeling of variety, of variety in class and colour and therefore a slight feeling of alternativeness, because there are lots of little cultures – lots of gay little cultures – which feel fairly safe in terms of violence ... I like the fact that there are lots of races – as long as they don't make too much noise ... [it's] slightly bohemian, slightly off beat, and I like that very much. (May 1996b, 208)

Dorian implies that other cultures can be commodified and safely consumed, provided that the threat of violence is contained and the different 'races' don't get out of hand.¹²

Studies of this kind raise the thorny question of 'authenticity', defined by Celia Lury as the desire for cultures that are relatively untouched by processes of commodification (1996, 179). The topic has been most fully explored in relation to tourism (Cohen 1988; May 1996c), where, it has been argued, tourists seek an 'authentic' experience of other places, even when they know such authenticity to have been 'staged' specifically for their benefit (MacCannell 1989), or where a new generation of 'post-tourists' may actually delight in

inauthenticity, willingly suspending disbelief for the temporary enjoyment of the 'exotic' (Urry 1990; 1995).¹³

Here, we propose to abandon the search for 'authenticity' and to examine the more tractable question of 'authentification' (identifying those who make claims for authenticity and the interests that such claims serve). Mary Crain (1996) provides a useful example from her ethnographic study of the incorporation of 'native' women into the Ecuadorean tourist industry. Recruited initially for domestic work in aristocratic households in Quito, 'native' women from the highland community of Quimsa were able to secure work in one of the capital city's luxury hotels. They were obliged to dress in a purified and aestheticized version of 'native costume', including a starched white apron, signifying compliant servitude. Though undoubtedly 'artificial' and shaped by relations of extreme inequality, such performative constructions of gender, class and ethnicity allowed these women access to an employment niche that would not otherwise have been open to them. By engaging in a calculated enactment of an essentialized 'native' identity involving the strategic performance of 'native' identity and the staging of 'authenticity', they demonstrated their (limited) power to reshape the hierarchical and exploitative relations in which they were placed to their relative economic advantage. While the commodification of difference was clearly part of the hotel's marketing strategy, offering tourists a sanitized version of 'native' hospitality through the visual appropriation of 'Indianness' (specifically via the display of the 'native' female body), the benefits were not entirely one-sided.

Debates about authenticity often imply a shrill reading of the effects of globalization (as discussed above) rather than a more subtle reading of the cultural politics of such 'transnational connections' (Hannerz 1996). The shrill reading can be criticized from various perspectives.

First, it exaggerates, romanticizes and reifies the extent to which any 'culture' is isolated from other cultures, implying the existence of a 'pure' cultural essence, from which any departure is a debasement. Instead, we might insist that all cultures are 'commodity cultures' to varying degrees.¹⁴ As James Carrier's (1994) historical survey confirms, a clear distinction between commodified products and the exchange of other kinds of goods (such as gift-giving) is, and always has been, highly

problematic. A more complex view of commodification acknowledges the many ways in which objects become 'entangled' in a web of wider social relations and meanings (Thomas 1991), emphasizing what Appadurai (1986) calls the 'social life of things'.

Second, the search for untainted 'authentic' local cultures implies a dangerous curtailment of the principle of cultural relativity. As Daniel Miller argues,

Central Africans in suits, Indonesian soap operas, and South Asian brands are no longer [to be regarded as] inauthentic copies by people who have lost their culture after being swamped by things that only North Americans and Europeans 'should' possess. Rather there is the equality of genuine relativism that makes none of us a model of real consumption and all of us creative variants of social processes based around the possession and use of commodities. (1995b, 144)

Two further examples of the commodification of cultural difference help to illustrate the value of a more complex cultural politics of consumption. The first concerns the development of an international market for so-called primitive art; the second examines the production and consumption of so-called 'black music'.

The commodification of Aboriginal art

Howard Morphy's (1995) analysis of two major international exhibitions of Aboriginal art, *Dreamings* and *Aratjara*, highlights the complex links between claims for 'authenticity' and the process of commodification as 'Aboriginal art' has moved out of the category of 'primitive art' into the 'mainstream' international art market. The process has been beset with contradictions (Michaels 1993). Traditionally, Morphy argues, Aboriginal art was communally owned and integral to the passing of intergenerational knowledge. Access to such work was restricted to men of a certain status. According to his analysis, the production of work for sale on the international art market (for display to unknown audiences) was a direct result of European colonization. Initially at least, the cultural and economic value of such work lay in its lack of external 'contamination'. Works that reached the international art market were almost by definition of questionable authenticity, since the artist would have been 'tainted' by the process of commodification. Aboriginal artists were therefore

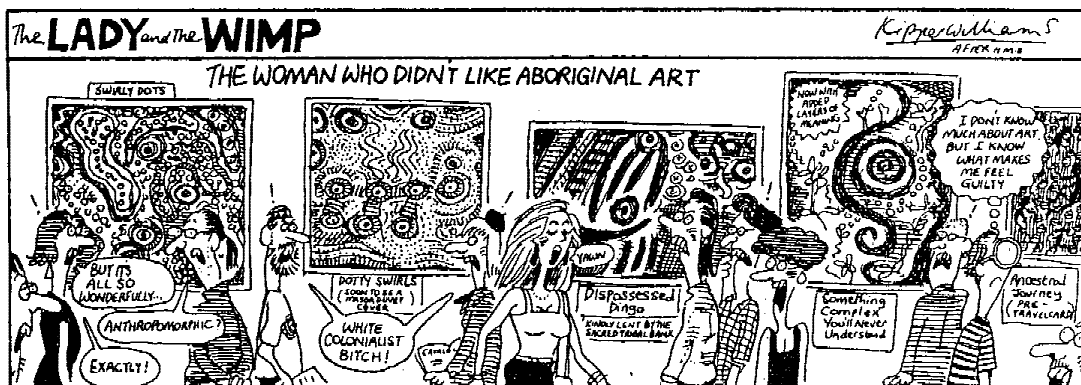


Figure 1 Ambiguous attitudes towards Aboriginal art

Source: *Time Out* (4–11 August 1993); reproduced by kind permission of Kipper Williams and *Time Out*

disadvantaged in selling their work overseas by European definitions of the 'primitive'.

Aboriginal art later came to play a significant role in the battle for Aboriginal land rights, further delegitimizing its status as art in the minds of conservative critics (who sought to maintain a distinction between culture and politics). Aboriginal art has also played a significant role in the movement of Australian nationalism away from its European roots. In this context, cultural criticism has gradually moved away from an emphasis on the work's ethnographic authenticity – stressing its religious significance and continuity with earlier traditions – towards a reclassification as 'art', with greater emphasis on the agency of individual artists. European notions of the 'primitive' have also been questioned by the intellectual climate of post-colonialism, as well as by a growing insistence on the diversity of Aboriginal art and artists. The process has been further contested by those who have sought to police the boundaries of Aboriginality, raising doubts about the work of so-called 'urban Aborigines', for example. Morphy concludes with qualified optimism:

In Australia the changing position of Aboriginal art has resulted in its incorporation in discourse on Australian art in general. It tends now to be collected by the same institutions, exhibited within the same gallery structure, written about in the same journals as other Australian art. And in many respects this has come about because, over many years, Aboriginal people have been struggling to make Aboriginal art part of the agenda of Australian society. It could be interpreted as the appropriation of Aboriginal art by a white

Australian institutional structure; the reality has been a much more equal relationship. (1995, 233–4)

Indeed, European exhibitions of Aboriginal art now provoke diverse reactions, ranging from those, such as the *Spectator's* art critic Giles Auty, who argued that Aboriginal art has declined in quality 'in direct proportion ... to the amount of interested input from non-Aboriginals' (1993, quoted in Morphy 1995, 230) to more self-conscious and ironic expressions of ambiguity, verging on embarrassment, towards the whole genre (see Figure 1).

Aboriginal artists have themselves responded to the dilemmas of 'authenticity' in some creative ways as evidenced by Jane Jacobs' (1995; 1996) subtle analyses of the community arts project at J C Slaughter Falls in Brisbane. In 1993, Brisbane City Council commissioned Laurie Nilsen and Marshall Bell of the Aboriginal visual arts company Campfire Consultancy to produce a work to commemorate the International Year of Indigenous People. The walking tour they designed encompassed a number of painted images that were self-conscious copies of artworks to be found at precontact sites throughout Queensland. Far from emphasizing the 'authenticity' of their work, however, the artists chose deliberately to unsettle conventional notions of Aboriginal authority. The project was executed and ratified by local Aborigines, but incorporated 'traditional' designs from Aboriginal groups from areas well outside Brisbane. The site was not previously of special significance to local Aboriginal groups, but the

City Council made a gesture towards 'authentication' by seeking permission from the Brisbane Aboriginal Council of Elders and making a 'copyright' payment. The artists also ensured that their work became a long-term community project by using materials that required regular repainting, contrasting its intended ephemerality with the 'timeless' qualities attributed to Aboriginal art in less self-critical accounts of 'authenticity'.

The commodification of 'black' music

The commodification of 'black' music presents equally complex issues for anyone interested in the 'traffic in things' and their associated meanings. Here, the evidence is taken from Susan Smith's recent work on the cultural politics of music, particularly her discussion of 'race', space and civil rights in Black America (1997, 515–23). Despite being set within a concern for the 'social and economic construction . . . of ideas about race difference' (515), the topic is fraught with difficulties. The terminology for such a discussion is immediately problematic – whether one writes of black, 'black' or Black music, for example (and similarly of white, 'white' or White audiences). Further difficulties arise when one tries to convey the significance of the material conditions in which particular forms of music were produced without essentializing the social relations of production or denying the individual creativity of particular artists. Such difficulties recur in discussions of the content and form of different musical styles (where words such as syncopation, rhythm and harmony are scarcely adequate for conveying the nuances of the music as it is performed). Many of the issues are highlighted in debates about how the music is 'heard' by different audiences.

Smith recognizes at the outset that 'black music' is a contested terrain, 'which gives rise to all kinds of dubious arguments about authenticity, essentialism and appropriation' (1997, 515), yet she continues to emphasize the very characteristics of 'black' music that give rise to such arguments. Having discussed the way that music has provided 'a potent voice for oppressed peoples', she identifies some 'common elements' that allegedly unite all of the various forms of 'black' music she discusses, from ragtime and jazz to soul and rap, all of which, she asserts,

attach importance to the skill of improvisation, emphasizing performance rather than composition, creation

rather than interpretation, and spontaneity rather than formality. (1997, 516)

Focusing on the 'expressivity' of 'black' music and on its political significance (see Gilroy 1993, 75) plays into the hands of those who regard 'black' music as being less intellectually demanding and less 'pure' an art form than so-called 'white' music (the 'whiteness' of which is rarely discussed). What, for example, is implied about the creativity of individual artists by insisting that 'black' music must always be related to the material conditions in which it was produced? Though critics such as Clarence Lusane may be correct in asserting that, 'From slave town to motown, from Bebop to Hip Hop, black music has been shaped by the material conditions of black life' (1993, 42), this is surely no more true for 'black' music than for any other kind.

Describing the content and form of 'black' music is no less fraught. What, for example, is implied by the assertion that 'Black music tells it like it is' (Smith 1997, 517)? Is 'black' music to be understood as a simple 'reflection' of the conditions of black people's material existence, documenting 'the social crisis engulfing Black America in ways that are more obvious and immediate than most government reports and scholarly texts' (517)? Or should it be approached, like other cultural forms, as a creative reworking, a complex representation of those conditions?

Similar arguments apply to the consumption of 'black' music where, as work by Paul Gilroy (1987) and Les Back (1996) confirms, there is a world of difference between listening to music performed live in a communal setting and listening to recorded music in the privacy of one's home. Such diverse contexts of consumption highlight the problem of what Allinson (1992, 447) calls 'marketing ghetto authenticity'. Debates about musical 'authenticity' have often focused on the alleged distance between particular artists and the conditions with which their work may once have been associated (such as the ghetto environments with which even the most commercially successful rap artists still seem keen to associate themselves). But these debates are further complicated by contexts of consumption, which include 'white' middle-class teenagers listening to 'black' music in the comfort of their suburban bedrooms.

Claims to 'authenticity' are a crucial aspect of such music's commercial appeal, suggesting that, in terms of consumption if not production, 'black'

music has largely failed in its attempts to establish 'a space of creativity which whites could not occupy' (Smith 1997, 518). It is exactly this paradox that the commodification of (at least some forms of) 'black' music seeks to exploit. Those who promote such music emphasize the 'authenticity' of its conditions of production, while seeking to make the 'product' commercially available for consumption by audiences who may be located in very different conditions, but who at the same time are drawn by the music's (actively promoted) claims to 'authenticity'. Controversies over 'offensive' lyrics, the attachment of 'parental guidance' labels and debates about the alleged misogyny and homophobia of rap music all need to be interpreted in these wider contexts (see hooks 1994; Skelton 1995), rather than in simplistic terms of 'authenticity' and 'appropriation'. As Smith (1997, 519) concludes: 'black' music contains crucial clues about the social construction (and I would add, the commodification) of difference. Its cultural politics involve:

the complex intertwinings of dirt-poor roots and middle-class dreams, aesthetic ambitions and social strivings, the anarchic impulse and the business ethic. (Guralnick 1986, quoted in Smith 1997, 522)

Conclusion

Rather than approaching commodification in an arbitrary and *a priori* way, adopting a language of moral outrage or blanket condemnation, this paper has attempted to engage with commodification in more complex ways, weighing appropriate empirical evidence in each specific case. Taking material culture seriously involves going beyond the individual interpretation of commodities, and reinstating the importance of social relations with all of their associated inequalities (Gregson 1995). It also requires an examination of the social relations of production *and* consumption (through empirical work with actual consumers 'on the ground'), as well as a critique of the ideologies and discourses through which such relations and material artefacts are represented. From such a perspective, the distinction between practices and discourses begins to dissolve as particular things (specific commodities) are used to objectify social relationships, serving as a kind of commentary on our social experience.

As geographers, we might take a lead from the work of Arjun Appadurai, who sought to trace the meaning of commodities as they are inscribed in their forms, uses and trajectories. As Appadurai argues: 'it is things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context' (1986, 5). Extending Appadurai's analogy, we might begin to trace the *social geography of things* as they move in and out of the commodity state, with different forms of commodification having variable effects on specific social groups in different places. As Appadurai (1986, 17) insists: 'the commodity is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things'.¹⁵ As commodification extends its reach into an ever-widening range of domains, the commodity form has become increasingly universal. But the significance that is attached to specific commodities differs markedly from one place to another according to their contexts of production and consumption:

Where societies differ is in the way commoditization as a special expression of exchange is structured and related to the social system, in the factors that encourage or contain it, in the long-term tendencies for it to expand or stabilize, and in the cultural and ideological premises that suffuse its working. (Kopytoff 1986, 68)

Where, then, should we look for future directions in geographical research on commodification? One possibility is provided by the revival of 'material culture' studies that is currently taking place in anthropology and archaeology. Such studies insist on taking 'the material' in material culture seriously, locating the shifting meaning of things in the context of consumers' everyday lives via empirically grounded ethnographic work (Miller 1998; du Gay *et al* 1997). Cook and Crang's (1996) recent work on 'commodity circuits' takes a similar approach, following the physical movement of particular culinary goods and their associated 'geographical knowledges' through the chains of meaning that link their production and consumption. Such an approach eschews a search for historical and geographical 'origins', seeking instead to map the juxtapositions and displacements through which particular goods acquire their specific meanings (Crang 1996). It is an approach that we hope to extend through future research on the transnational flows of food and clothing as part of the construction of 'diasporic identities'.¹⁶

A second possibility seeks to challenge the distinction between people and things, based on

recent developments in the sociology of science and technology. Contrary to conventional studies of the social impact of technology, approaches informed by actor-network theory emphasize the web of relations through which a variety of human and non-human actors are interlinked. Such approaches seek to transcend conventional dualisms, exploring how actions are embedded in materials and extended through time and place (Murdoch 1997). Tracing such networks, according to Nigel Thrift (1996), offers a key means of blurring economic and non-economic boundaries. Actor-network theory's language of '(quasi-) objects' and 'immutable mobiles' has already been applied in geographical studies of 'cyberspace' (eg Bingham 1996). Its potential for understanding the geographies of other aspects of material culture and contemporary consumption remains largely untapped.¹⁷

As outlined above, future work might also seek to extend our understanding of the process of commodification beyond the classic definition of particular kinds of manufactured goods and services. When reading an advertisement, for example, a variety of meanings are being consumed, only some of which are directly connected to the commodity, and which may or may not lead to the consumption of the product itself (Jackson and Taylor 1996). Such meanings are, of course, frequently coded in terms of various forms of social difference. A geographical understanding of commodity cultures should therefore involve both an exploration of the physical movement of goods and services (the 'traffic in things') and an appreciation of the commodification of cultural difference. This is undeniably a broad agenda, but it provides ample scope for bringing together the geographies of production and consumption, and maybe ultimately transcending the unhelpful distinction between 'the cultural' and 'the economic'.

Notes

- 1 Such arguments have a long pedigree within cultural studies, dating back to Dick Hebdige's (1979) pioneering studies of the appropriation and transformation of meaning in various subcultural styles, recalling Paul Willis's (1978; 1990) arguments about the 'objective possibilities' of cultural items to express the profane creativity of common cultures.
- 2 The term 'commodification' is preferred to the more common American usage 'commoditization' because

of the latter's implication of a society-wide historical transformation, akin to other processes such as urbanization or modernization.

- 3 Much could be said about the language in which commodification is commonly discussed. Consider, for example, the implications of describing a culture as having been 'swamped' by commodities, or of the commodity 'invading' or 'penetrating' a particular society. On Marx's use of anthropocentric metaphors such as the 'commodity fetish', see Baudrillard (1981).
- 4 As Carrier's (1994) work has shown, the (essentialist) distinction between commodities (produced for sale) and gifts (produced for exchange) can be exaggerated. The model of social transformation it implies, from the 'reciprocal dependence' of social agents transacting the inalienable objects of a highly personalized gift economy, to the 'reciprocal independence' of agents transacting wholly alienable objects in an impersonal economy of commodities, is also highly questionable (compare Gregory 1982).
- 5 Frow's examples focus on the commodification of information and the person, including studies of the market in DNA, the trade in human organs and property rights in 'personality'.
- 6 Even the language of 'reception' now seems an inadequate recognition of the agency of consumers in actively transforming the meaning of goods as they incorporate them into their lives. As research by Burgess (1990) and others has shown, the production and consumption of environmental meanings is far more complex than earlier studies of the 'mass media' implied.
- 7 The idea that a product has an 'intended' meaning that may be 'subverted' or 'resisted' by consumers is a contested one. The intentionality of the producer can often only be inferred, and consumer creativity is such that a product's range of meanings will always exceed the attempt to impose a single reading. Miller (1987, 112) suggests that 'a system of categorization is an inherent attribute' of every artefact and that 'some notion of intention is also usually attributed to their creation'. While some ambiguity of meaning will always be present (used deliberately in some cases to entice consumers), all systems of representation require some degree of shared meaning or 'system of recognition' (cf Hall 1997).
- 8 Miller's work on the Caribbean consumption of Coca-Cola reaches a similar conclusion, asserting the importance of local context (where it is generally drunk in combination with rum) in defining the product's cultural specificity. In this context, Miller (1998) insists, Coca-Cola should be thought of as 'a black sweet drink from Trinidad' rather than as unambiguous evidence of the 'globalization' of taste.
- 9 Appadurai (1986) makes a similar argument about transcultural flows of commodities and the unstable distribution of knowledge on which they rest. He

concludes that, 'Commodities represent very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge' (41).

- 10 Compare Miller's argument that:
the remainder of the 1990s will probably see a movement beyond any simple moralizing of commoditization and mass consumption as either destructive or liberating, concentrating instead on examining how these processes often differ from the assumptions made in dominant models of modernization. (1995b, 147)
- 11 Most of the exceptions are provided by anthropologists rather than geographers. See, for example, the work reviewed in Ferguson (1988), Gupta and Ferguson (1992) and Miller (1995b).
- 12 This argument is developed at greater length in Crang and Jackson (forthcoming) where the case of Stoke Newington is compared with two other neighbourhoods in North London (Brent Cross and Wood Green). See also Miller *et al* (1998) for ethnographic material in support of this argument.
- 13 Glennie and Thrift (1992, 436) suggest that such 'aesthetic reflexivity' is a distinguishing characteristic of modern consumption, where consumers exhibit new attitudes to authenticity, which are more bound up with aesthetic illusions than with a quest for the real or the deeply spiritual.
- 14 Compare Appadurai's (1986, 16) insistence that 'the capitalist mode of commoditization [interacts] with myriad other indigenous social forms of commoditization'.
- 15 Appadurai is paraphrasing Igor Kopytoff's (1986) argument about the 'cultural biography of things' (though the notion of 'biography' as a scripted narrative is itself problematic).
- 16 The proposed research by Philip Crang, Claire Dwyer and myself is funded by ESRC as part of their current Transnational Communities programme (award number L214252031).
- 17 Current ESRC-funded postgraduate research by Paul Stallard at Sheffield is attempting to use actor-network theory and related approaches to explore the cultural geographies of books and book-buying.

References

- Allinson E 1992 It's a black thing: hearing how whites can't *Cultural Studies* 6 438–56
- Appadurai A ed 1986 *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- 1996 *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis
- Auty G 1993 *Spectator* 7 August
- Back L 1996 *New ethnicities and urban culture* UCL Press, London
- Baudrillard J 1981 *For a critique of the political economy of the sign* Telos, St Louis MI
- 1998 *The consumer society: myths and structures* Sage, London
- Bingham N 1996 Object-ions: from technological determinism towards geographies of relations *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14 635–57
- Bourdieu P 1984 *Distinction* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London
- Burgess J 1990 The production and consumption of environmental meanings in the mass media: a research agenda for the 1990s *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 15 139–61
- Carrier J G 1994 *Gifts and commodities: exchange and Western capitalism since 1700* Routledge, London
- Classen C 1996 Sugar cane, Coca-Cola and hypermarkets: consumption and surrealism in the Argentine Northwest in Howes D ed *Cross-cultural consumption* Routledge, London 39–54
- Cohen E 1988 Authenticity and commoditization in tourism *Annals of Tourism Research* 15 371–86
- Cook I and Crang P 1996 The world on a plate: culinary culture, displacement and geographical knowledges *Journal of Material Culture* 1 131–53
- Crain M M 1996 Negotiating identities in Quito's cultural borderlands: native women's performances for the Ecuadorean tourist market in Howes D ed *Cross-cultural consumption* Routledge, London 125–37
- Crang P 1996 Displacement, consumption and identity *Environment and Planning A* 28 47–67
- Crang P and Jackson P forthcoming Geographies of consumption in Morley D and Robins K eds *British cultural studies* Oxford University Press, Oxford
- du Gay P 1996 *Consumption and identity at work* Sage, London
- du Gay P Hall S Janes L Mackay H and Negus K 1997 *Doing cultural studies: the story of the Sony walkman* Sage, London
- Featherstone M ed 1990 *Global culture* Sage, London
- Ferguson J 1988 Cultural exchange: new developments in the anthropology of commodities *Cultural Anthropology* 3 489–513
- Fine B and Leopold E 1993 *The world of consumption* Routledge, London
- Friedland W H Barton A E and Thomas R J 1981 *Manufacturing green gold: capital, labour and technology in the lettuce industry* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Frow J 1997 *Time and commodity culture: essays in cultural theory and postmodernity* Clarendon Press, Oxford
- Gillespie M 1995 *Television, ethnicity and cultural change* Routledge, London
- Gilroy P 1987 *There ain't no black in the Union Jack* Hutchinson, London
- 1993 *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness* Verso, London
- Glennie P D and Thrift N J 1992 Modernity, urbanism, and mass consumption *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10 423–43

- Goodman D E and Redclift M** 1991 *Refashioning nature: food, ecology and culture* Routledge, London
- Gregory C** 1982 *Gifts and commodities* Academic Press, London
- Gregson N** 1995 And now it's all consumption? *Progress in Human Geography* 19 135–44
- Gupta A and Ferguson J** 1992 Beyond 'culture': space, identity, and the politics of difference *Cultural Anthropology* 7 6–23
- Guralnick P** 1986 *Sweet soul music* Penguin, Harmondsworth
- Hall S** ed 1997 *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices* Sage, London
- Hannerz U** 1992 *Cultural complexity: studies in the social organization of meaning* Columbia University Press, New York
- 1996 *Transnational connections* Routledge, London
- Harvey D** 1990 Between space and time: reflections on the geographical imagination *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80 418–34
- Hebdige D** 1979 *Subculture: the meaning of style* Methuen, London
- Hendrickson C** 1996 Selling Guatemala: Maya export products in US mail-order catalogues in **Howes D** ed *Cross-cultural consumption* Routledge, London 106–21
- hooks b** 1992 *Black looks: race and representation* Turnaround, London
- 1994 *Outlaw culture: resisting representations* Routledge, London
- Howes D** ed 1996 *Cross-cultural consumption* Routledge, London
- Jackson P and Taylor J** 1996 Geography and the cultural politics of advertising *Progress in Human Geography* 19 356–71
- Jackson P and Thrift N** 1995 Geographies of consumption in **Miller D** ed *Acknowledging consumption* Routledge, London 204–37
- Jacobs J M** 1995 'That dangerous fantasy of authenticity': a review of the J C Slaughter Falls community arts project, Brisbane *Ecumene* 2 211–14
- 1996 *Edge of empire: postcolonialism and the city* Routledge, London
- Keat R** forthcoming Market boundaries and the commodification of culture in **Ray L and Sayer A** eds *Culture and economy after the cultural turn* Sage, London
- King A D** ed 1991 *Culture, globalization and the world system* Macmillan, London
- Kopytoff I** 1986 The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process in **Appadurai A** ed *The social life of things* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 64–91
- Lury C** 1996 *Consumer culture* Polity Press, Cambridge
- Lusane C** 1993 Rap, race and politics *Race and Class* 35 41–56
- MacCannell D** 1989 *The tourist* 2nd edition Macmillan, London
- Mackay H** ed 1997 *Consumption and everyday life* Sage, London
- Marx K** 1867 (republished 1977) *Capital, Volume 1* Vintage Books, New York
- Massey D** 1994 *Space, place and gender* Polity Press, Cambridge
- Massey D and Jess P** eds 1995 *A place in the world? Places, cultures and globalization* Oxford University Press, Oxford
- May J** 1996a 'A little taste of something more exotic': the imaginative geographies of everyday life *Geography* 81 57–64
- 1996b Globalization and the politics of place: place and identity in an inner London neighbourhood *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21 194–215
- 1996c In search of authenticity off and on the beaten track *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14 709–36
- McClintock A** 1995 *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* Routledge, London
- McDowell L** 1997 *Capital culture: gender at work in the city* Blackwell, Oxford
- Michaels E** 1993 *Bad Aboriginal art and other essays* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis
- Miller D** 1987 *Material culture and mass consumption* Blackwell, Oxford
- 1992 'The young and the restless' in Trinidad: a case of the local and the global in mass consumption in **Silverstone R and Hirsch E** eds *Consuming technology* Routledge, London 163–82
- ed 1995a *Acknowledging consumption* Routledge, London
- 1995b Consumption and commodities *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 141–61
- 1997 *Capitalism: an ethnographic approach* Berg, Oxford
- ed 1998 *Material cultures* UCL Press, London
- Miller D Jackson P Thrift N Holbrook B and Rowlands M** 1998 *Shopping, place and identity* Routledge, London
- Morphy H** 1995 Aboriginal art in a global context in **Miller D** ed *Worlds apart* Routledge, London 211–39
- Murdoch J** 1997 Towards a geography of heterogeneous associations *Progress in Human Geography* 21 321–37
- Peck J** 1996 *Workplace: the social regulation of labor markets* Guilford Press, New York
- Peet R** 1986 The destruction of regional cultures in **Johnston R J and Taylor P J** eds *A world in crisis?* Blackwell, Oxford 150–72
- Pendergrast M** 1994 *For God, country and Coca-Cola* Phoenix, London
- Richards T** 1991 *The commodity culture of Victorian England* Verso, London
- Ritzer G** 1993 *The McDonaldization of society* Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks CA
- Sayer A** 1997 The dialectic of culture and economy in **Lee R and Wills J** eds *Geographies of economies* Arnold, London 16–26

- Simmel G** 1907 (republished 1978) *The philosophy of money* Routledge, London
- Skelton T** 1995 'Boom, bye, bye': Jamaican ragga and gay resistance in **Bell D and Valentine G** eds *Mapping desire* Routledge, London 264–83
- Slater D** 1997 *Consumer culture and modernity* Polity Press, Cambridge
- Smith S J** 1997 Beyond geography's visible worlds: a cultural politics of music *Progress in Human Geography* 21 502–29
- Thomas N** 1991 *Entangled objects* Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA
- Thrift N** 1996 *Spatial formations* Sage, London
- Urry J** 1990 *The tourist gaze* Sage, London
- 1995 *Consuming places* Routledge, London
- Whatmore S** 1995 From farming to agribusiness: the global agro-food system in **Johnston R J Taylor P J and Watts M J** eds *Geographies of global change* Blackwell, Oxford 36–49
- Willis P** 1978 *Profane culture* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London
- 1990 *Common culture* Open University Press, Milton Keynes